

Soldiers
Online

DLI Training

Story and Photos by John Valceanu

LOCATED in a famous California resort town, on a hill overlooking the Pacific Ocean, the Presidio of Monterey is ideally sited for rest and relaxation. But there is very little rest and virtually no relaxation for service members assigned each year as students at the Presidio's Defense Language Institute.

DLI is the Defense Department's primary foreign language teaching center, producing linguists for all branches of the military. The Army comprises approximately 50 percent of

the student body, followed by the Air Force with approximately 30 percent. The remaining 20 percent is composed of Navy and Marine Corps personnel, said CSM Ronnie Chaney of the 229th Military Intelligence Battalion, to which all Army personnel at DLI are assigned.

The battalion consists of six companies, four of which are made up of initial-entry personnel, while the other two are composed of "careerists." DLI does not produce Military Occupational Specialty-qualified personnel — it teaches languages to soldiers holding specialties that require language ability.

Languages studied at DLI run the gamut from Spanish and French to Russian and Serbo-Croatian to Farsi and Arabic to Korean and Chinese. The basic French and Spanish courses last little more than six months, while courses such as basic Arabic and Korean can take more than a year to complete.

To be considered for language training, candidates must score well on the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery and Defense Language Aptitude Battery. Yet each year many students fail to complete the course because of the grueling workload.

Former Soldiers staffer John Valceanu is now a civilian journalist in Alexandria, Va.



Arabic-language students at the Defense Language Institute translate taped interviews during an end-of-course exercise.

Army Linguists

Students must pass a series of examinations that test their listening, speaking, reading and writing abilities in the languages they are pursuing. Most students find themselves spending every spare second studying and practicing. It's not unusual to overhear dining facility banter in Farsi or late-night conversations held in Russian.

"The first couple of months my head would just ache all the time," said PFC Shannon Stone, an Arabic student. "You have to pack so much into your brain so fast. But the teachers were great. They are native speakers, and they try to make sure we learn a lot about the cultures, as well as about the languages themselves."



Most of DLI's language instructors are native speakers who bring to the classroom an understanding of regional culture and customs.

Teachers and students work very closely, Stone said, and the teachers often take a personal interest in the success of their students.

"We send them off to take their tests, and we wait for the results with our hearts pounding," said Hiam Kanbar, an Arabic teacher. "We can't hide our pride when they do well, and we do everything we can to help them."

Kanbar's feelings are shared not only by her fellow civilian instructors, but also by the soldiers who work at the institute.

"The most frustrating thing is seeing students who just can't grasp the language. They may be bright, and they're working hard, but they're just not cut out to be linguists," said SSG John Parker, a military leadership instructor.

Parker and other soldiers assigned to the institute often serve as both platoon sergeants and military leadership instructors during a typical DLI tour.

"It's tough to try to keep the students focused for up to 16 months," Parker said. "They're young, there are lots of distractions, and there are probably a million other things they'd rather be doing than studying Arabic."

SFC Awny Qubty said the support provided by soldier instructors and cadre members is critical for students.

"Working here, you have to be involved 100 percent, because the work involves people's lives and futures," Qubty said. "We let them know that there is life after DLI. We pass on our expertise and knowledge."



To graduate, DLI students must pass rigorous examinations, including listening to and understanding the spoken language.

We tell them what it's like to deploy and to actually do the job in the foreign country. You can't substitute that with anything else."

"This place has changed drastically since I came through here as a private 20 years ago," said installation CSM Eugene Patton III, speaking of the

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اللغة للسلام
"Language for Peace"

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Computer-based instruction in DLI's state-of-the-art language laboratory allows students to practice listening to and reading foreign languages.

school's increased focus on performance and military values. "Back then, the emphasis was on passing, rather than reaching proficiency.

"Today, the experience is very intense," he said. "We give the students all they can handle and then some. The service member who graduates from DLI is the best-educated over-achiever you'll find in today's military. I don't think you could find a college or university in the world that can produce the type of qualified linguists we do in the amount of time it takes us."

Many enlisted soldiers enter DLI with previous college experience. SPC Kara Bonts, an Arabic student, completed a master's degree in French literature at Kansas State University before enlisting in the Army. She said the institute has some advantages over traditional university departments.

"We get access to native speakers that you don't find often in university departments. The teachers here totally

"The opportunities here to learn a language are the finest in the world."

destroyed any stereotypes I may have had about people from the Middle East," Bonts said.

SPC Fady Bactor, also an Arabic student, has a bachelor's degree in international relations from Hamline University and is a native of Egypt. He says his language background helps him with his work at the institute.

"Having native knowl-

edge helps me a lot. Words my parents taught me, but which I haven't used in years, are coming back to me," Bactor said. "I wouldn't change a thing about the way in which they're teaching the classes. In as much as you can teach Arabic in a classroom, they're doing it right."

SPC John Hoge, another Arabic student, holds a geology degree from the University of

Georgia. He is impressed with the level of instruction he is receiving at the institute.

"I had great instructors at the university, but they were always very busy," Hoge said. "Here, the teachers are very focused on us."

For PFC Tony Bonacci, the personal attention made his studies at the institute a more positive experience than going to college.

"I dropped out of the University of California, and I was looking at my options," Bonacci said. "I thought becoming a linguist for the Army was the best option I had, so I took it. The teachers here really care about the students, and they want us to do well. That works for me."

Not all DLI students have a college background, of course. SPC Adolfo Cisneros, who is studying Korean, is a former chaplain's assistant. He wanted a change of career, but he didn't want to attend college.

"The opportunities here to learn a language are the finest in the world," Cisneros said. "The courses are designed in such a way that not everyone will be able to do it in the time allotted, but the courses produce capable linguists."

SGT Rob Del Valle is another soldier who wanted a change of career. But as a cavalry scout, he said, it was



A DLI student speaks Arabic with a roleplayer during a training exercise at Fort Ord.



The Language Training Exercise allows students to put both their language and soldier skills to the test during intense and realistic training scenarios. Here, students carry a “sniper victim” to safety.

difficult for him to get out of his MOS.

“One of my only options was to become an Arabic linguist. Fortunately, I got the DLAB score and made it to DLI,” Del Valle said. Unfortunately, Del Valle was unable to pass the tests at the end of the 16-month Arabic course. Recognizing his ability, however, institute officials placed him in the Farsi course.

“Luckily, Farsi comes much easier for me than Arabic did,” Del Valle said. “The language is influenced by Arabic, so all the stuff I learned in the Arabic course is helping me out a lot.”

For those making it to the end of their courses, the capstone event is the Language Training Exercise. Held in a MOUT training site at nearby Fort Ord, Calif., the exercise simulates a deployment to a low-intensity conflict.

During the LTX, newly-trained linguists are confronted by non-English-speaking protestors and bystanders. Some are innocent, some



Soldiers try to talk a “local” into giving up his weapon during training at the Fort Ord urban training area. Realistic field training allows DLI students to test their language skills under the types of conditions they’ll later encounter in real operations.

are aggressive, and some are armed and dangerous. The exercise is a “trial by fire” for most of the young linguists, because they are forced to put their language skills to use under stress in a military setting.

“When young soldiers graduate

from DLI, they become part of the linguist family. And this becomes their home,” Patton said. “They’ll be coming back for advanced courses. They’ll be coming back as instructors and as cadres. This is the Mecca for linguists. This is home.” □